

**Before the
FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION
Washington, D.C. 20554**

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| In the Matter of |) | |
| |) | |
| Federal-State Joint Board on |) |) CC Docket No. 96-45 |
| Universal Service |) | |
| |) | |
| Requests To Redefine "Voice Grade |) |) DA 99-2985 |
| Access" For Purposes of Federal |) | |
| Universal Service Support |) | |

**REPLY COMMENTS
of the
ORGANIZATION FOR THE PROMOTION AND ADVANCEMENT
OF SMALL TELECOMMUNICATIONS COMPANIES**

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February 4, 2000

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REPLY COMMENTS
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ORGANIZATION FOR THE PROMOTION AND ADVANCEMENT
OF SMALL TELECOMMUNICATIONS COMPANIES

The Organization for the Promotion and Advancement of Small Telecommunications Companies (OPASTCO) files these replies to comments submitted in the above-captioned proceeding.¹ OPASTCO is a national trade association representing over 500 independently owned and operated telephone companies serving rural areas of the United States and Canada. Its members, which include both commercial companies and cooperatives, together serve over 2.5 million customers.

The Notice sought comments on requests to redefine "voice grade access" under the Commission's universal service rules.² The primary goal of such a redefinition is to increase throughput speeds for consumers using the voice network for data

¹ In the Matter of *Requests to Redefine "Voice Grade Access" for Purposes of Federal Universal Service Support*, Public Notice, CC Docket No. 96-45, DA 99-2985 (rel. Dec. 22, 1999)(Notice).

communications.³ While this goal is laudable, commenters point out that there are many technical factors in addition to voice grade bandwidth which affect the speed of data over the voice network. Examples of such factors include attenuation loss, induced noise, digital/analog conversion rates, individual modems, the interconnection methods and hardware of data service providers, non-linear distortion, impedance impact and ensuing echo, etc..⁴ Further, changing the definition could require time-consuming and costly revisions to industry technical standards.⁵ The Commission should use caution and consider whether a redefinition of “voice grade access” would be the best viable means to achieve the primary goal of faster data speeds.

Regardless of the method or methods ultimately used to bring superior data speeds or other improved services to consumers, no method will be viable for high-cost customers without adequate support. As commenters have demonstrated, current support for voice service is already falling behind costs due to the “interim” cap imposed on universal service funding.⁶ Any new requirements must be crafted with corresponding mechanisms to ensure adequate support. Imposing new regulations on small, rural carriers without making provisions to support all associated new costs contributes to upward pressure on the rates paid by consumers for local service.

An adjustment of one aspect of universal service can have significant repercussions

² Notice, p. 1.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁴ United States Telecom Association (USTA), pp. 6 - 9; Advanced Fibre Communications, Inc. (AFC), pp. 1 - 3; *see also* Western Alliance, pp. 5 - 6; Nortel Networks (Nortel), p. 4.

⁵ AT&T, pp. 8 - 10; Nortel, pp. 5 - 6.

⁶ National Exchange Carrier Association (NECA), pp. 3 - 5; National Telephone Cooperative Association

on support that is designed to benefit high-cost consumers. All such effects merit serious consideration. Deliberations should also take into account the rapid pace of technological and marketplace developments in the telecommunications industry. It has been noted that the Commission plans to conduct a review of the definition of universal service,⁷ and will presumably contemplate suitable modifications. It would be entirely appropriate for issues such as data throughput rates, whether analog or digital, to be considered as part of an overall review. The Commission is to be commended for exploring ways to enhance the data speeds available to consumers, but it must be wary of the effects, either direct or indirect, that new requirements can have on ratepayers.

Respectfully submitted,

**THE ORGANIZATION FOR THE PROMOTION
AND ADVANCEMENT OF SMALL
TELECOMMUNICATIONS COMPANIES**

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February 4, 2000

(NTCA), pp. 2 - 4; Western Alliance, p. 9.

⁷ Western Alliance, pp. 9 - 10.

CERTIFICATE OF SERVICE

I, Tiffany N. Belk, hereby certify that a copy of the comments by the Organization for the Promotion and Advancement of Small Telecommunications Companies was sent on this, the 4th day of February, 2000 by first class United States mail, postage prepaid, to those listed on the attached sheet.

/s/ Tiffany N. Belk

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